Thoughts on operations in the Helmand River Valley

The overall classification of this brief is:

12 May 2010

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FRONT TOWARD ENEMY

Agenda

- Introduction
- Disclaimer
- Perceptions/Stereotypes
- Operations Overview
- Planning Process
- Intelligence Overview
- Operational Approach
- Lines of Operation
- Lessons Learned (by WFF)
- Parting Thoughts

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Disclaimer

- There are no silver bullets to operations in Afghanistan.
  - The search for certainty.
  - Be wary of Afghan “Experts”
- The topics discussed today relate to my battalion’s operations in Garmsir District, Helmand Province during the Summer and Fall of 2009.
  - Much happened before and much since.
  - Every phase creates conditions for future success as well as generates different requirements
  - May not be as applicable as the fight changes
- The purpose of this brief is to provide a framework for preparation for deployment
  - Can’t live in the past, but it’s hard to anticipate what the future will look like.
  - Lessons Learned vs. Lessons Identified
  - Expeditionary vs. Steady State Operations

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Perceptions/stereotypes

- While we may all be looking at the same problem, we are looking at it from different perspectives.
  - Everyone wants to be value added.
- Shaped by our experiences, we are likely to become victims of our experiences if we are not careful.
  - What does thinking outside the box mean?
- US culture reflects the diverse make up of our society.
  - Anyone can become “American”, not so for many of our partners.
- Can’t underestimate the power of myth in our culture.
  - French effort at the Panama Canal
- Expectation management – results oriented
  - A tie is like kissing your sister.
  - Soccer/Football mentality.

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Coalition

Perceptions/stereotypes

- US has much in common with the Afghans
  - Both fought the British for our "independence"
  - Shapes our view of British intentions
  - "The Redcoats are coming!"
  - "Americans are in Afghanistan for global interest, the British are there for revenge

- Experiences continue to shape how we view each other.
  - ISAF = I Saw Americans Fighting
  - "Indomitable in retreat, invincible in advance, insufferable in victory"
  - Americans will always do the right thing… once they have exhausted all the alternatives

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JOINT FORCE
Perceptions

- USMC Approach
  - READY, FIRE , AIM
  - Accept the mission longer before we understand what it entails
  - We are the best at COIN…..just ask us.
  - Are we in fact a separate nation within the coalition (Marinestan)?
- US Army Approach
  - READY, AIM, AIM, AIM, AIM, AIM……FIRE
  - Exceptionally Deliberate…but will get to the right answer.
  - Limited institutional understanding of fixed wing aviation does create difficult conditions for USMC.
- USAF/USN
  - Support the war fighter as long as it does not get in the way of preparations for WWIII.
  - Have a lot of capability to offer if they would accept the realities of the current fight.

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DOD
Perceptions/Stereotypes

- Completely different culture and traditions
  - Not bad just different
  - Organization does affect ability to transition to COIN.
  - As the smaller service, USMC can attain institutional cohesion (no matter where the unit comes from we know each other) to a much larger degree than our “Big Brothers.”
- Our perceptions of each other shape our beliefs
  - Don’t confuse me with the facts. Anecdotal information is good enough for me.
  - Have inter-service relationships ever been good?
  - Do we view each other as peer competitors?
  - Service roles and responsibilities vs synergy and synchronization
  - Trust deficit always slows initial operations

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USMC
Truth

- We always refer to ourselves as Marines first.
- When left alone, elements of the MAGTF will fight each other.
  - Can be exceptionally critical of each during planning.
  - Will always present a unified front to the Joint Force.
- Attempts over the years to disband the USMC have given us a bunker mentality.
  - If everyone is in fact out to get you, are you paranoid?
  - Navy's Police Force with a propaganda machine to rival Joseph Stalin.
- MAGTF facilitates synergy and synchronization
  - Every element works for the same commander.
  - Don't face some of the challenges of the other services.

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Operations Overview

- Expeditionary mindset must be maintained in everything that is planned and executed.
  - USMC and British Forces view of what expeditionary means is quite similar.
- No common understanding of command relationships
  - Perceptions shape willingness to send forces OPCON to any country/service.
- Maneuver is easy, sustaining the force over time is hard.
- Every District and village is different.
- COIN Mindset
  - By, With, & Through the Afghans.
  - They decide if we are being successful.
  - COIN is a verb.
- Don’t mistake Iraq for Afghanistan.
  - Don’t read Clausewitz with Jominian Eyes!

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Operations Overview

- Nature of the fight in Afghanistan mandates a single battle approach at all levels.
  - Ensure allocation of resources is in line with operational objectives.
- Detailed planning by war fighting function
  - Requirements vs. capabilities
  - Every element of the force crosses all the functions.
- Integration of the War Fighting Functions
  - Day to day integration is at the company level and below.
  - Centralization at higher levels delays detailed planning.
  - Company is not structured for this fight, but makes do.
- Company/platoon fight (Decision making time horizon)
  - How long does it take to implement a decision at your level of command?
  - Some battalion level decisions took several months to implement.

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Planning Process

- Begin with the end in mind……the end is very fuzzy.
  - HHQ Campaign plan will define objectives, but will take a lot of assessment to make them usable. (Even harder in a coalitions)
  - What role does the PRT play in establishing objectives?
  - Challenge is to ramp down an ill defined objective to something tangible.
    - We know how it ends, but how does it start?
    - Challenge is exponentially more difficult in new areas where the enemy and social dynamic is not understood.
    - Development of Measures of Effectiveness
- Concurrent planning at every level.
  - Understanding of decision making time horizon.
  - Higher headquarters as a resource provider.
- Process vice the Plan is the most important aspect.
  - Constant reevaluation of estimates of supportability and operational environment as well as ability to implement COAs.

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Planning Process

- Planning for RIP with Battle Group - South was a big distracter.
  - Resources and timings were designed to limit impact on future operations. (Op KHANJARI and PANCHA PALANG)
  - Negative impact on BG-S' ability to deepen the hold in Garmsir.
- Operation KHANJARI
  - Enemy focused operation in a population centric campaign.
  - Attack to seize control of the population from the Taliban.
  - Established initial objectives based on bottom up refinement.
  - Control of Key Crossing Points and Population Centers (Available combat power was the limiting factor).
  - Objectives doubled battle space, but large gaps remained.
    - POWER AVAILABLE DID NOT EQUAL POWER REQUIRED.

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Planning Process

- Don’t expect too much from intelligence early.
  - Initial operations are designed to generate intelligence (both enemy and human terrain).
  - Intel enablers are starting from the same place as you.
  - Limits of UAS (What is our target thinking?)
  - Plan for integration of all assets.
- Logistics drives operations
  - Can’t use equipment that isn’t there.
  - Tactical patience (power required = power available)
- Commander’s Intent must be established early.
  - If you want to affect how your unit conduct’s operations, you must start early in the training program.
  - Commander’s messaging throughout training program

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Commanders Guidance

- Battalion was redirected to OEF in the midst of Exercise Mojave Viper (USMC MRX)
  - Focus of training was on building capacity in accordance with the USMC Training & Readiness Manual
  - 90 day post-MV training program was focused on preparation for the operational environment.

- Commander's Intent for Block V was in fact intent for deployment
  - Detailed discussion with Squad Leaders and above.
  - Built on intent used throughout every phase of training.
  - Focus placed on how we would approach operations.

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Commanders Guidance

- Intent = Force of personality
  - Targeted Imposition of Will
  - Carefully choose the issues to insist upon
    - Individual/collective skills
      - Kinetic/non-kinetic
    - Unit cohesion
  - Must be willing to expend a considerable amount of energy enforcing your will.
- Command & Influence
  - Lose your illusion of control.
  - What does “control” really mean?
  - Foster critical decision making skills in junior leaders.
  - Preparing a unit for casualties.

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(Published to all hands - Feb 2009)

- We will understand the operational environment. Cultural effectiveness is key to our success!

- Our ability to develop positive relationships with the population is critical. Every slight, no matter how small, can set us back months. Ask yourself, “Is what I’m doing or about to do moving the Afghan people closer to or further away from supporting the Afghan Government and coalition forces?”

- Prepare yourselves physically, morally, spiritually and intellectually. All aspects of your preparation are interrelated. Ignore them at your unit’s peril. Discipline, cohesion, training and comradeship are what will make us effective and resilient.

- The task of leadership is not to put greatness into the Marines and Sailors, but to elicit it, for greatness is already there. Never forget, calm is contagious. The right leader at the right place and time can change the course of history.

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FRONT TOWARD ENEMY

(Published to all hands - Feb 2009)

- We must continue to develop a sense of family and mutual trust. We will deal openly with emotions…Remember no Marine or Sailor fights alone. They fight as part of a cohesive team.
- We are a combat unit that is expert in the application of violence. Use tactical patience, suppress the enemy and when you move, do it with purpose, aggression and violence of action intent on finishing the enemy. The ability to anticipate and the courage to take action on that belief is critical to mission accomplishment. After first contact, the enemy will fear us more than hate us.
- I expect to see no evidence of euphoria as we accomplish our mission. Marines give quarter once their enemy has submitted. Remember, it's all business. As long as you act within the ROE and my intent and orders, your conscience should be clear and your honor clean.
- Our predecessors are watching us. It is now our turn, our duty, to take our place in the illustrious line of Marines and Sailors who came before us.

Trust in your brothers
Dedicate yourself to America's Battalion and our mission.
Our measure is not found in how much time we have,
but in what we do with the time given us.

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Intelligence Overview

- Enemy activity throughout newly occupied AO, particularly further south
  - Knew we were coming all the way to the Fish Hook (42 CDO).
  - Began reacting to our operations months before we arrived.
- Terrain and weather impact operations
  - Flat, heavy vegetation, canals and flooded fields (Limited LOS)
  - Poppy, wheat, corn growth/harvest
- GIROA absent in many areas for 4 years
- Village affiliations more important than tribal throughout the Area of Operations
  - Wary of CF presence
- Little historical information from a US perspective
  - Coalition intelligence effort did not appear to be very integrated.
  - Most valuable initial source was Battle Group – South
  - Intelligence picture was built from the ground up.
  - Barely scratched the surface during our deployment.

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Physical Terrain

Enemy Forces

- Loose association of leaders/fighters/suppliers /narco-traffickers/financiers/smugglers
- Blended into population and able to move relatively freely (coercion/support/indifference)
- Capability fluctuated as trained fighters moved in/out of area
  - Taliban Training Team
- IED/SAF engagements with Fire Team to Squad sized forces after initial engagements.
  - IEDs utilized more as obstacles/covered by fire.
  - The shiny object is there for a reason.
- Enemy spring offensive forced us to act before we were logistically ready.
  - “7 consecutive miracles.”
- Enemy was constantly adapting, but challenged to withstand the constant pressure.

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Operational Approach

- Combat Operations were shaping in order to allow PRT operations.
  - Who sets the priorities in a coalition?
  - Long term capacity building.
- ISAF Shape, Clear, Hold, Build & Transition construct
  - Shaping really crossed all lines.
  - Implementation required PRT support
- Separate the populace from the insurgents
  - What happens when almost everyone has some links to the insurgency?
  - The landowner is not a Talib, but his best tractor mechanic is.

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Operational Approach

- Discredit the insurgents in the eyes of the civilians.
  - Criminalization of the insurgency.
  - How do you criminalize something without established ROL.
  - Afghan to Afghan engagement.
- Leverage Stability team already in place (STABAD).
  - Different than our experience in Iraq.
- OpTempo
  - Synchronization and synergy does not necessarily equate to speed.
  - Don’t have to be faster than the bear.
  - Plan to miss opportunities.

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Setting Conditions

- Ability to build relationships is THE CRITICAL ENABLER!
  - How do you make friends with someone you appear to have nothing in common with?
  - Attack the Network in a method the enemy fears most!
- What does it take to become a mentor/partner?
  - Being assigned the billet does not count!
- Regardless of your opinion, their solution may work.
- Conversely, your well thought out plan may not be received well.
- Can’t control what people think about you!

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Lines of Operation

Governance, Econ Development and Reconstruction

- Significant civilian presence at Battalion Level.
  - Not uniform by district.
- PRT manages most LOOs.
  - Who establishes LOOs/prioritizes effort?
- TFH and British-led PRT collocated in Lash Kar Gah.
  - MEB-A located at Bastion
- Friction between civilian agencies
  - “Share the road or we’ll build our own.”
- Varying levels of GIROA governance capacity.
  - Garmsir well ahead in TFL and most of TFH.
- Different programs in different provinces.
  - PRT capacity not uniform across the provinces.

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Lines of Operation

ANSF Development

- Every country has a role and a different level of interest.
  - What role does the PRT (SSR) have?
  - PRT impact felt most with respect to the Police.
- Consistency of Mentoring Effort.
  - Three different ANA mentoring teams in 6 months (US/UK).
  - Two different ANP Teams (US/UK)
  - Two different ABP Teams (USA/USMC)
- Different approach
  - Mentoring vs Partnering and mentoring
- Friction between agencies
  - Competition for limited ANSF resources
  - Impact of mentor performance evaluations
- Varying levels of ANSF capability
  - Not just about developing the current force.
  - Would you be willing to go on a 4 year deployment?

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Maneuver

- Decentralized and distributed fight.
- Every Operation has a purpose and is a combat operation.
- CONOP briefing requirements are not uniformly understood or implemented.
  - Continuous availability of 429 makes it easier.
- Maneuver was easy sustaining the force over time was hard.
  - Train for integration of HST sustainment in all operations.
  - If you aren't going to stay, it isn't worth going.
- Enablers must follow in trace of combat forces.
  - Engineer PB build effort is decisive.

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Maneuver

- Lines on maps do not mean roads, they are tractor paths.
  - Roads do not provide any advantage.
- OP Barma lanes at all levels with all units in order to facilitate maneuver.
  - US is still learning this lesson
  - Just because you have a vehicle does not mean you should use it.
- VSWEEP to dominate command wire firing points.
  - Enemy reaction to TTPs..they learn!
  - Not enough to own the road!
  - Must dominate the terrain 500-700 meters off the road.

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Fires

- Combined Arms principles work in COIN.
  - Kinetic operation as performance art (Second and third order effects mean everything).
  - Application will vary from village to village.
  - Visible demonstration of NO WORSE ENEMY!

- Distributed nature of the fight vs. FSCC/FST
  - FSCC/FST model does not support distributed operations.
    - Distribution of Fires personnel to support operations in every direction. Observer must be with the squad in contact.
    - Observer needs to be able to direct all types of fires (kinetic and non-kinetic)
- ROE/Tactical Directive will dictate actions
  - Common understanding of decision making process =
  - Understanding and implementation is not uniform
  - Must be a commander's program (Squad Leaders and

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Information Operations

- IO fight is different depending on your location.
  - Level of command as well as district.
  - Who is your target?
- Impact of CivCas
- Daily interaction with the Afghans Marines set conditions for success.
  - If your population is not receptive to the message, what do you do?
  - Population uses your reactions to the operational environment as a gauge.
  - Every element of the force has an impact on local perceptions and must be integrated.
- Radio in a box (RIAB) was very successful.
  - Set conditions on the ground in order to allow the messages to be believed.
- Preapproved messages ready for dissemination.
  - Message must be tailored to the audience.

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Force Protection

- Expeditionary environment.
  - Integrated positions with ANSF.
  - Local population plays the most critical role in our security.
- Leverage technology as a force multiplier
  - Persistent Surveillance Systems, ISR, ICOM.
- Limits of Combat Engineers
  - US Army operations delayed pending construction of COPs.
  - USMC built our COPs/PBs from scratch, but not very well.
- From fighting positions to SPAWAR in 3 months.
  - Trend in US forces is to continuously upgrade quality of life past real requirements.

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Logistics

- Our biggest advantage is in logistics.
  - By our standards (Iraq), we operated by the skin of our teeth.
  - No matter challenged our system was, it was better than our enemy's.
- Mentor
  - Never miss an opportunity to involve your ANSF partners.
  - Partnered combat trains were the rule.
- Cross train and build depth in your personnel
  - Everyone does windows (your off duty time is when you sleep).
  - Every member of the command is a logistician.
- Efficiency Matters
  - Even with a relatively significant number of vehicles, still had a to maximize every square inch of cargo space.
- Always Have a Ground Solution to Everything
  - Even with our numbers, helicopters remain a precious resource.
- Recovery Ops
  - Deliberate Operation
  - Self Recovery (can learn a lot from the Afghans)
  - Wrecker was my most valuable asset

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Command & Control

- Asset availability determined architecture.
- Prepare to transition from no-data to a data-centric COC
  - RIP/TOA with no data on 22 June.
  - No data at companies until 17 August.
  - Management of information flow (mid-1990s procedures).
- What does the COC do? Coordinate activity or produce reports?
- Redundant communications and the “will to communicate”
  - Plan for interference and unexpected
  - Conduced Op KHANJARI utilizing a single SATCOM net.
- Cross-training
  - Battalion Comm Platoon not staffed with MOS operators for data transmissions systems (everyone is a communicator).
- Coalition Integration
  - SIPR access not authorized for coalition partners
  - Must attach Radio Operators as liaisons to coalition partners in battle space.

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Parting Thoughts

- Your ability to build relationships, at every level, will determine your ability to be successful.
- Commanders ability to influence COIN operations is developed during pre-deployment training.
  - Understand where decisions can be/will be made.
  - Must be integrated into every training event from the start.
- Expeditionary ethos in our young Soldiers, Marines and Sailors is alive and well.
- Every district is different!
  - Graduate school exam / Local population are your professors.
- When going into new areas, plan for what you have, but ensure your plan is scalable to incorporate newly arriving equipment.

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Parting Thoughts

- Everything affects everything
  - Don’t assume everyone understands what synergy and synchronization means (Goes double for coalition/interagency operations).
  - Everything you do (or don’t do) sends a message to the local population.
- Interrelationship of kinetic and non-kinetic operations.
  - No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy.
- US/NATO ISAF ROE and the Tactical Directive must be incorporated into every training event.
  - Commander’s Issue, not a lawyer’s issue.
- Embrace the tyranny of prioritization
- It’s all about Unity of Effort and enabling the Afghans to win the fight!
  - Governance capacity building, ANSF development, economic opportunity and reconstruction are war winning activities!

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Questions

At the rifleman's level,
COIN is not a theoretical discussion